

LONG WAY DOWN

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PHOTOGRAPHS TOM BAILEY

Trail's newbie scrambler discovers facing your fears is a surprisingly simple way to achieve greater things.

The map lied. Long Crag was not quite as small and inconsequential as it looked on paper. It loomed above me capped with grey cloud, and as I stood at the bottom contemplating what was about to come I decided that this was a misdeed I was not going to forgive.

Brian Evans' *Scrambles in the Lake District* reserves three stars for classic routes with continuously interesting lines. Only a few Grade 1 scrambles have been awarded this elusive triple accolade, and Long Crag is one of them. It stands high above Coniston in the Lake District at the mouth of the Coppermines Valley. It is easily accessible, the climb starting only a short walk from Coniston village centre.

Let me be clear: I walk to get to the top. It is always about getting to the top, often as fast as I can, like some sort of fitness test if you will. The hard work is put in and more often than not the ascent makes me question my sanity, but then it's done and I know that I would unquestionably do it all over again. The views or simply succeeding in the challenge of reaching the top are often rewards enough. This time, though, it was all about the journey, and exploring what makes Long Crag such a great scramble. Here's the hitch, though: scrambling was unexplored territory for me, and I needed persuading that it is truly an exciting and worthwhile adventure.

Scrambling can be an unnerving exercise, especially for someone who has never done it before. And it's extremely daunting for someone who is not altogether comfortable with heights. It requires much confidence in one's abilities; but my colleagues Dan and Tom both assured me that I would be absolutely fine. Yet when Tom suggested we'd have a practice run on a lone piece of rock before the real deal, their smiles started to falter. Slick rock and chunky boots are not a recipe for success, and as I floundered around trying to find a secure hold in order to pull myself up they must have wondered what they'd let themselves in for. I was a frustrated mess. Physically I knew that I was capable of doing it; but physiologically committing to the rock, and so embracing my fear of being on the edge, was something else entirely.



At first Hannah found the climb up Long Crag nerve-racking, but it soon began to inspire confidence she didn't know existed.

Psychiatrists believe acrophobia – an irrational fear of heights – stems from negative thinking, so it's easy to be influenced by family or friends who are uneasy. Alternatively, like me, you may have had a traumatic experience in the past. Thinking back, I can see the truth in this. I had been abseiling over the edge of a 25 metre high tower and missed my first step over the edge. Next thing I knew I was three metres down, still over 20 metres above ground, with a pain in my leg that quickly turned it black. Having had no fear before this incident, it's now something I really struggle to get past every time I feel that empty space looming around me.

The moment that my foot slipped, time simultaneously slowed and sped up. It happened so quickly. Yet the rush of adrenaline that hit me as I dropped made those few seconds feel like the longest in my life. It punched me in the stomach before rushing to my head, setting my heart stuttering along the way. In that short time, I seemed to take everything in; I missed nothing. Then it was over. The rope caught and I was safe again. Apart from the pain. As the rope caught I swung under the tower lip and my right leg had slammed into the sharp corner. The mind-numbing sickness that hit me as my leg caught is still etched into my mind six

years later. That pain hits me stronger than the initial fear of the fall. An acrophobic person processes thoughts so quickly that they're often unaware of them. They will have calculated how much pain could be caused from falling and injury before you can say 'acrophobia'. Their sense of perspective is drastically altered and they will believe the height to be much bigger than it truly is. As you would expect, this is not an ideal mind frame to have when you like climbing mountains, and so I had decided that something needed to be done. That, for better or worse, is how I found myself at the bottom of Long Crag.

The 'wonderfully grippy' rock provided great handholds.



OUR BED FOR THE NIGHT



Trail stayed at lovely Lakeland House B&B in Coniston village: www.lakelandhouse.co.uk

“I knew that it was my mind playing tricks on me”

The short climb to the start of the crag was wet, wild and boggy. Recent rainfall had turned the ground into a mossy, bracken-infested swamp; and as Dan and Tom started winding their way upwards I had no choice but to follow. We hit the start of the crag and Tom led the way, being careful to pick out one of the easier routes for me, navigating smoothly over the slab-like rock and ridges.

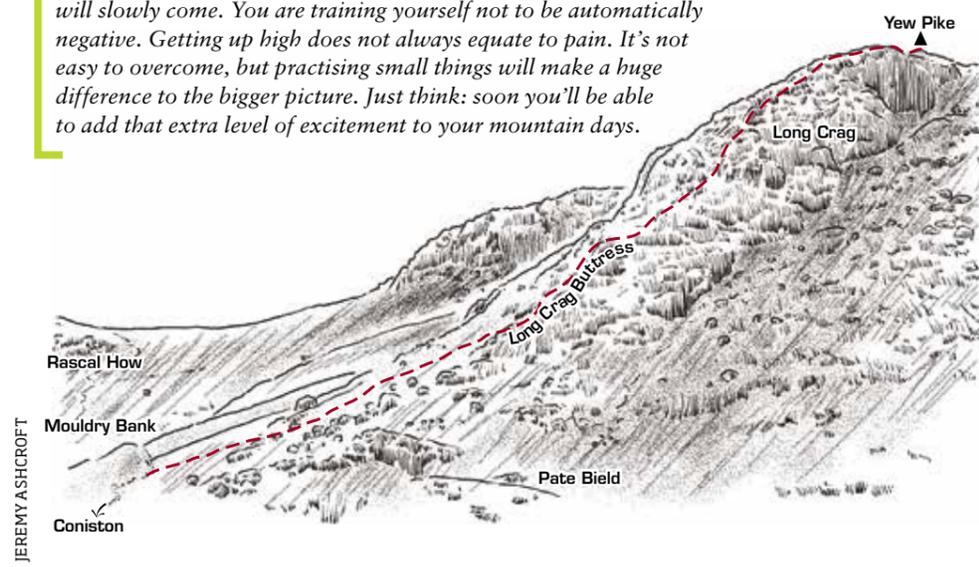
Yet, contrary to my expectations, the higher we climbed the more comfortable I felt. The introduction to the climb was gradual, easing me into the flow of moving upwards. The rock was black and slippy, and treacherous should you be careless where you place your hands and feet. Where dry, though, it was wonderfully grippy beneath my fingers. I started reaching further, higher and attaining footholds that fifteen minutes ago would have been too much. Having secure handholds greatly inspired the confidence I needed to keep going, and so despite what felt like sheer exposure behind me I didn't feel in danger of toppling backwards. There was a great satisfaction in being able to use my whole body to propel myself up the hillside rather than relying on the slow monotony of my plodding legs.

There were many different routes to explore should you want something a little more adventurous, and I found myself feeling more inclined to push myself the further we went. Reaching the top was great – but only for the reason that we had got to the top. The views were made bland by the grey day; but for the first time in a long time I had enjoyed the part I usually hated, and I decided that I loved Long Crag for making me realise it. That was refreshing.

Slackliners are comfortable walking across a line at such height because they start small. They routinely practise with a line that is only 30cm above the ground. Then they keep going until they can walk all the way along the line without falling off. Then they raise the rope and do it all over again. And again. The more you do something, the more accustomed to it you become. Heights are no different. Get to a climbing wall. Practise getting as high as you can. Practise bouldering. Build your strength. Sweat a little and your confidence will slowly come. You are training yourself not to be automatically negative. Getting up high does not always equate to pain. It's not easy to overcome, but practising small things will make a huge difference to the bigger picture. Just think: soon you'll be able to add that extra level of excitement to your mountain days.

Long Crag is perfect for the beginner scrambler or for anyone who needs to do a bit of confidence building. Like any good first-time option there are many escape routes, so you don't need to commit to the climb. The climb was short at 160m and, despite looking so imposing from the bottom, it was over exceptionally quickly. The crag is made up of fragmented sections of rock, meaning that you could do the route bit by bit with rests in between and time enough to talk yourself into the next section – not that I needed to do that as it turned out. We did the climb and the walk back to the car in two hours, making it a great route for starting out on, or if you need to squeeze one more scramble in before you head home from your holiday in the Lakes. Long Crag really is just the start, though, with Above Beck Fells leading on to Wetherlam for those who want to continue the adventure.

Whether you are just a bit nervous of heights and exposure or have a fully-fledged fear of them, it can blind you to rationality. It can be hard to believe that you can achieve something when all you see are potential injury zones. I'd felt the exposure at my back the whole way, chipping away at my mind, so when we reached the top it was a spectacular feeling of achievement. Tom and Dan had led me safely over the mish-mash of rocks to the top, and despite feeling exposed I knew that it was my mind playing tricks on me. Overcoming these mind tricks gives me confidence that I will soon be clambering over much more extreme scrambles than I could previously achieve. T



TRAIL'S ROUTE

Strenuousness ●●●●●
 Navigation ●●●●●
 Technicality ●●●●●



Distance 4.5km (2¾ miles)
 Time 2 hours
 Maps OS Explorer (1:50,000) OL6
 Start/finish Coniston TIC (SD303975)